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>> Shortly after hanging up the phone, the meteorologist's voice was replaced by loud static as the television signal disappeared. Suddenly, the roof of her house collapsed inward from the tornado's wrath.

"I thought my house exploded from a bomb or something," Smith said.

A furious wind gust ushered Smith off the ground and onto part of her collapsed roof that caused her to slide into the dismantled basement of her home.

"We lost everything except the clothes on our backs," she said. "But I didn't have time to panic because I had invested everything into this move. It was difficult but I had no choice but to go on."

The experience helped Smith better relate to others who experienced adversity, she said.

While her house was being rebuilt, Smith started law school at age 34. During her first year, she went to school during the day and worked an eight-hour overnight shift in the court system monitoring juveniles who were arrested in Fayette County. The days and nights often seemed like a blur.

"Some days I came home from class, cooked dinner for the kids, did homework, left around midnight for work and got off in time to see the kids off to school and go back to class," Smith said.

Yet even with all of this going on around the city of Lexington, Smith noticed something that startled her.

"There was a lack of diversity," she said.

To put it in perspective, out of the 130 plus students in her class, only a little more than a handful were minorities.

"I probably noticed it more because I was raised in a big city; in New York everywhere you go there's diversity," she said. "I was concerned, not so much for me, but for the minorities of younger generations. They really didn't have a lot of prominent minority role models; especially in the legal profession."

Smith, an African American, developed a personal relationship with Judge Pamela Goodwine who had beaten the odds. She overcame a near-death experience to fulfill her dreams of becoming a judge; In August 1999, she became the first African-American female to be appointed to the bench in Fayette County and subsequently elected.

"Judge Goodwine was so important because she was one of a few examples in Lexington that I had of someone who had triumphed as a minority," Smith said.

"I was glad she had someone to turn to," said Goodwine. "I tried to be an inspiration and motivate her."

Goodwine's journey helped spark a vision in Smith beyond just becoming a lawyer.

"What Judge Goodwine was to me, I wanted to be for others," Smith said. "Be someone who other minorities can look at and see that they can dream big and accomplish those dreams right here in Kentucky."

Driven by this passion, Smith focused her attention on having an impact on diversity at the University of Kentucky College of Law.

She and another law student teamed up with the assistant dean for admissions at the UK's College of Law, Drusilla Bakert, to travel around the region to assist in recruiting more minorities to the law school. They were the first students hired by Bakert to serve as recruiting assistants.

"Valorie went above and beyond what was required, as she tends to do," Bakert said. "She just didn't help recruit the students and then lose contact with them once they got to the school. She really kept in touch with them and served as a role model for them."

Bakert still directs the program today and said that the school's minority enrollment went from 12 percent in 2007 to as high as 17 percent in 2009 and 2010.

Smith also co-created a program dubbed "law student for a day" at the UK's College of Law in 2006 that still exists today. It provides under graduate minority students who have an interest in attending law school an opportunity to spend the day shadowing a current minority law student. The program's goal is to also establish mentoring and networking relationships that will encourage the prospective minority student to pursue a legal career.

"If it encouraged one person then it's been a success," Smith said.

"She really helped with recruiting," Bakert said. She created a lasting impact. People like Valorie don't come along every year."

In addition to her efforts to improve diversity, she has served key roles with numerous organizations that consistently work to help grow Lexington, such as Women Leading Kentucky, Partners for Youth, Commerce Lexington's Minority Economic Development Advisory Committee and Lexington's Urban League Young Professionals.

One of Smith's proudest and most important accomplishments in her efforts to help others involves her work with the Kentucky Legal Educational Opportunities program. It offers scholarships to attend one of Kentucky's three law schools. The scholarships are